



INSTANT REPLAY: Members of the "Letter People" staff watching a television monitor playback of an episode they had just completed videotaping at

the KETC Channel 9 studio. They are puppeteers and members of the production crew. (Post-Dispatch Photo by Scott C. Dine)

KETC Banking On Alphabet Puppets

By PAUL WAGMAN
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The biggest investment in the history of St. Louis's educational television station is being made on a group of egomaniacs named Miss Itchy Itch, Mr. Super Socks and assorted alphabetic accomplices.

Since January of last year, the station, KETC-TV, Channel 9, has been at work on a series of 15-minute shows that it hopes will break new ground in educational television: the first series to help teach children beginning reading.

More of the station's money and staff time have been staked on the series than on any previous project. But the payoff, says James B. Barnes, programming director, could be "a major national series" that would be a significant contribution to education and that could win the station prestige as well.

The series, entitled "The Letter People," has already been praised by educators in several other cities who have been shown segments of the show. Clifford Low, for example, an official in the Portland, Ore., school district, said he thought the series "makes a tremendous contribution" and that it "has the potential for making a national name for itself."

The series is an adaptation of a nationally acclaimed reading system called Alpha One. The system, developed by two teachers in a village in New York, has since been marketed by a firm called New Dimensions in Education, Inc., of Plainview, N.Y. It has been used

in thousands of schools across the country.

The key feature of Alpha One is its "letter people," or puppet characters representing each letter of the alphabet. The adventures of these characters form the television stories which, along the lines pioneered by "Sesame Street," are meant to be entertaining as well as educational.

For example, there is Mr. V, a highly cultured man. He is speaker of 18 languages, a master of every instrument in the orchestra, and a man who knows the taste of a good truffle.

Mr. V is the proud — extremely proud — owner of a "violent velvet vest," alternately described as a "very, very, very violent velvet vest." Such repetition of sounds is the major technique used to teach the child the sound of each letter.

"Dear oh dear!" the Duke of Doodle-Bug weeps in the beginning of the saga of Mr. Delicious Donut. "How depressing, how disappointing, oh dismal, dark day!"

To which the Duchess of Doodle-Bug replies: "How dramatic you are, dear darling!"

Of course, teaching letter recognition on television is scarcely new; "Sesame Street" has been doing it for years. But Channel 9 programmers hope to go beyond recognition in "The Letter People" to teach how the letters link together to form words; in short, how to read.

Nobody contends that the series in itself can teach children to read. "The

Letter People" is designed to be used either as an adjunct of the rest of the Alpha One program, or as a supplement to any of several other major reading programs.

One of the techniques the show uses to both teach and entertain is to parody television. In one such parody, entitled "The Catching Game," announcer Monte Swell asks contestants to look at an object on a screen — a baseball bat, for instance. Then the contestants must ask the proper letter people to step out and line up in the order required to spell the word.

Sprinkled through each show is humor with an adult appeal — an attempt to maintain teacher interest.

The setting for the tribulations of Miss Itchy Itch, for example, is none other than "Rick's," the tavern run by Humphrey Bogart in the movie "Casablanca." There, Miss Itch pleads, perhaps inevitably, "Scratch it again, Sam."

Channel 9 decided to make "The Letter People" after research showed a need for a television series to teach reading at the primary level, Barnes said. The research included a conference with reading specialists from all over Missouri.

Thomas K. McDonough producer and director of the series and author of a dozen of its scripts, says "Sesame Street" is inadequate because it teaches only letter recognition.

McDonough, a lanky man with brown hair that hangs past his shoulders, said that to research his script-writing, he gets up at 8 a.m. each Saturday and watches

cartoons. After writing a script, he tries it out on the children in his University City neighborhood.

McDonough, 27 years old, was lured to Channel 9 from an educational television station in Cleveland after he impressed executives with his work on "Inside/Out," a series in which the station here was involved.

McDonough's work has won high praise from some other members of the Channel 9 staff, and so has that of King Hall.

Hall, described by McDonough as "dynamite," is the set designer for the series and the chief puppet marker. Hall's previous employers include Walt Disney Productions.

Channel 9 has committed itself to making at least 30 segments of "The Letter People," but it would like to make 120 in all. To do so, it will need financing from a foundation or from outside companies, Barnes said.

The station and New Dimensions are splitting the cost of the 30 segments—from \$350,000 to \$400,000. "We're on a pay-as-we-go basis while we seek outside funding," Barnes said. "This is a cooperative effort to get the thing on the air."

Among the cities in which the show has been seen so far are Los Angeles, Miami, Kansas City, and Tampa, Fla. In St. Louis, it can be seen at 9 a.m. Saturday and, starting Sept. 2, at 6:45 p.m. Mondays.

Channel 9 is marketing it in a variety of ways—to educational television stations, to school systems and to other outlets.